

EREBUS: ONE SHIP, TWO EPIC VOYAGES, AND THE GREATEST NAVAL MYSTERY OF ALL TIME. By MICHAEL PALIN. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018. ISBN 978-0-7352-7427-3. xiv + 234 p., maps, b&w illus., references, appendix, index. Hardbound. Cdn\$37.00. Also available as an eBook.

Like so many people around the world, but especially in Canada and Great Britain, renowned comedian, actor, and travel writer Michael Palin, CBE, was enthralled by the news that on 2 September 2014, Ryan Harris, a marine archaeologist with Parks Canada, had discovered the sunken wreck of HMS *Erebus* in Wilmot and Crampton Bay, off the northwest coast of Adelaide Peninsula, Nunavut. Under the command of Sir John Franklin, along with HMS *Terror*, it had sailed from Britain in 1845 to attempt the first transit of the Northwest Passage and had disappeared, to become the object of innumerable searches. Palin was sufficiently intrigued by the ship's discovery that he was motivated to write a "biography" of the ship. He very soon discovered that the Franklin expedition was not the first polar expedition in which the ship had taken part: from 1839 to 1843, also along with HMS *Terror*, under the command of Captain Sir James Clark Ross, it had made three deep penetrations into the Antarctic, in search of the South Magnetic Pole. Presumably because the Antarctic expedition is relatively little known compared to the story of the disappearance of the Franklin expedition and the numerous searches for it, especially during the 14 years following that disappearance, Palin has devoted 130 pages to the Antarctic expedition as against 104 pages to the latter story.

That division is certainly justified and the former story, in terms of excitement, is one to which his skills as a writer do full justice. On Ross's first deep southern penetration, having fought his way through an extensive zone of pack ice, to everyone's surprise he emerged into the open waters of the Ross Sea to be met with the remarkable sight of an active volcano, namely Mt. Erebus and, extending west from it, the spectacular ice cliffs of the front of the Ross Ice Shelf. Then on his second southern thrust in mid-March 1842, while trying to travel as far south as possible into the Weddell Sea while avoiding an iceberg, the two ships on the expedition collided with each other, both sustaining damage to their rudders, especially the *Terror*. Then, still menaced by an iceberg, Ross resorted to the dangerous manoeuvre of making a "sternboard," that is, going astern with the sails aback and shooting through a gap between icebergs stern-first. In short, Ross's Antarctic expedition in *Erebus* and *Terror* was a remarkable feat of seamanship that added vastly to our knowledge of the continent, although to his great disappointment Ross did not achieve his goal, that of locating the South Magnetic Pole. This was in fact an unattainable goal by sea, since at the time it lay well inland or perhaps beneath the ice of the Ross Ice Shelf.

Palin is to be warmly commended for consulting an impressive range of sources for his account of the Antarctic

voyage. In addition to the two standard published sources, namely Ross's own account (Ross, 1847) and that of surgeon Robert McCormick (1884), Palin has made excellent use of naturalist John Dalton Hooker's correspondence and journal, held at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, and the little-known, privately published journal of John Davis, Second Master on board *Terror* (Davis, 1901). Palin has also relied on the journal of Royal Marine Sergeant William Cunningham (2009), which provides an important view of every aspect from the lower deck. Somehow Palin even managed to locate the unpublished memoirs of Cornelius Sullivan, the blacksmith on board *Erebus* on the southern voyage, and also a letter from Lieutenant John Tarleton, First Officer on board HMS *Caryfort*, which called at the Falklands during the sojourn of *Erebus* and *Terror* there in April 1842, and which throws a useful light on Ross, Captain Crozier of HMS *Terror*, and the Falklands. Palin's account of the Antarctic voyage is up to his usual very high standard of careful research.

Strangely however, the history of the quest for the Northwest Passage and then for the missing Franklin expedition has been investigated in only a meagre fashion (one suspects mainly from secondary sources). The extreme case is Parry's second Arctic voyage in *Fury* and *Hecla* in 1821–23, which wintered first at Winter Island, north of Southampton Island, and then at Igloodik, but which is not mentioned at all. Coverage of the two critical expeditions that revealed at least the general outline of the fate of the Franklin expedition, namely those of John Rae in 1853–54 and of Sir Leopold McClintock and Lieutenant William Hobson in the *Fox* in 1857–59, is up to Palin's usual high standard, however, as is that of the discovery of the wreck of the *Erebus* in 2014.

An appealing feature of the book is Palin's insertion from time to time of a little humour. Thus McCormick's description of Table Mountain above Cape Town, "The horizontal stratification of the white siliceous sandstone forming the summit of the hills above their granite base is seen to great advantage from the sea" is followed by Palin's comment "Fit that on a postcard" (p. 60). Then, with reference to Cunningham's remarks at Simonstown that an issue of beer had "disordered some of the people's attics" (page 61), Palin comments that this was one of the most poetic euphemisms he had encountered for drunkenness. With regard to a medicine bottle recovered from the wreck of the *Erebus*, he notes that its contents were advertised as a cure for hypochondria, among other conditions, and adds that he loves the idea of a medicine that cures hypochondria.

The book is also enlivened by the fact that Palin has gone to the trouble of visiting many of the sites associated with the career of HMS *Erebus*. These range from Pembroke, South Wales, where the ship was built, to Hobart, Tasmania, which Ross visited twice for extended periods, to the delight of Sir John Franklin (then the Lieutenant-Governor) and his wife Lady Franklin; the Falkland Islands, including Port Louis, then the only settlement on the islands; Cape Horn; Ascension Island; Woolwich; Stromness (John Rae's

birthplace); Beechey Island (where the Franklin expedition wintered in 1845–46); and Westminster Abbey, with its memorial to Sir John Franklin. In each case, his description of the site adds enormously to the colour of the narrative.

For all the undoubted strengths of Palin's writing, it also reveals a number of weaknesses. For such an experienced world traveller, he is surprisingly confused with regard to compass directions. Thus on page 29 we are informed that on his way south along Prince Regent Inlet, John Ross mapped the *west* side of Boothia Peninsula—in fact, the *east* side. Then on page 105, in the Antarctic, James Ross is described as sailing east along the front of the Ross Ice Shelf from Mt. Erebus—in reality of course, he sailed east. Equally surprising is Palin's evident unfamiliarity with standard nautical terms; on several occasions he refers to a ship "mooring up," when from the context it is clear that he means "dropping anchor"; elsewhere in several places, ships are described as "weighing anchor" when clearly "dropping anchor" is meant. His knowledge of ornithology is also evidently limited: at Port Stephens on West Falkland, he encountered the species known throughout the Falklands, confusingly, as "Johnny rook" but refers to them as "crows." The species was actually the Striated Caracara (*Phalco boenus australis*), a member of the Falconidae, which bears no resemblance whatsoever to crows.

More disturbing is Palin's limited knowledge of Arctic exploration history. A few examples of his many errors will suffice. On page 40 he reports that the expedition of Captain Constantine John Phipps in 1773 reached the Barents Sea before being blocked by ice; in fact, it reached a highest latitude of 80°48' N, just west of the Sjuøyane, north of Svalbard (Phipps, 1874). On page 245 Cape Walker is listed as the northern point of Prince of Wales Island; in fact it is the northern point of Russell Island, as was established by Captain Ommanney's sledging campaign in 1851. John Ross's ship on his 1850–51 expedition was the *Phoenix*, not the *Mary*; the latter was the small escorting yacht commanded by Charles Phillips. And Cornwallis Island (p. 305) was discovered by Lieutenant William Edward Parry in 1819, not by *Erebus* and *Terror*.

The officers and men of Franklin's expedition, plus the several dozen men who died during the searches for the missing expedition, deserve better.

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- ON THE ARCTIC FRONTIER: ERNEST LEFFINGWELL'S POLAR EXPLORATIONS AND LEGACY. By JANET R. COLLINS. Pullman: Washington, State University Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-87422-351-4. vii + 297 p., maps, color & b&w illus., notes, bib., index. Softbound. US\$27.95.
- Ernest de Koven Leffingwell was one of those men who, a century ago, journeyed to the frozen ends of the Earth in the interests of scientific and geographical discovery. But Leffingwell didn't just visit the Arctic; he made it his home for the greater part of a decade. For nine summers and six winters, Leffingwell toiled on the icy northern coast of Alaska. As a naval war veteran, Arctic explorer, and scientist, he deserves to be more widely known.
- Leffingwell was meticulous in many aspects of his life, notably in writing his detailed daily journal. His biographer set herself the difficult challenge of creating a readable narrative from this material, also using Leffingwell's surviving letters and published works. In this task she succeeded admirably.
- The author, Janet R. Collins, graduated in geography and was a director of the Huxley Map Library at Western Washington University, the northernmost university in the contiguous United States. Retiring in 2008, she spent four years researching Leffingwell to create this book. Her interest had originally been piqued in 1992 while she was backpacking in the Sadlerochit Mountain range of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in the northeastern corner of Alaska. The catalyst was a point marked on a map as "Camp 263." This spot turned out to be the location of just one of some 380 camps that Leffingwell pitched during some eight years of Arctic fieldwork, and it was to set in train the genesis of this biography.
- Collins begins her account by explaining how, in November 1897, as a 22-year-old graduate student, Leffingwell felt his passion for the Arctic ignited in a lecture hall at the University of Chicago where the great Fridtjof Nansen recounted his recent Arctic experiences—his attempt to reach the geographical North Pole during the 1893–96 *Fram* expedition.